

Essay

# Digital Recording Technology in the Writing Classroom: Sampling as Citing

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[1]

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In 1968, Marcia L. McElvain wrote a brief *CCC* article titled "The Creative Process: The Relationship of the Musical and Literary Composer." In it, she argues that composers like Igor Stravinsky and Paul Hindemith engage in the very same creative processes used by literary artists, including students: "If we can pry a little into the minds of the *musical* composer, perhaps we can better understand the creative processes of the *literary* composer" (128). McElvain discusses the "grubbing around" that characterizes prewriting, though she doesn't name it as such. She also ponders the importance of inspiration and purpose in both written and musical compositions. Finally, she addresses issues of audience: "Perhaps if writers, as well as composers, could keep in mind the primary artistic obligation to reach their audiences and to communicate meaningfully to their contemporaries, there would be more persons counted among those contributing to the 'noble objective' of creating beautiful music and literature" (132).

Although its expressivist (and elitist) bent is dated in many ways, McElvain's article hints at some interesting questions: What role can the creative arts (specifically music) play in first-year writing courses? In what ways might the creative processes of academic writing and music-making (or painting, sculpting, acting, drawing, photography, dancing, or cooking for that matter) converge and inform one another? These are not new questions by any means, and scholars, teachers, and artists have a history of creating pedagogies to explore the connections among creative processes. For example, Shannon Hopkins and Gregory Kammer have developed an interdisciplinary art-and-writing collaborative project where graphic arts students are paired up with writing students. Compositions produced by the writing students are distributed to the art students who respond by creating a piece of artwork inspired by the writing. This process is then reversed. As part of the program, students discuss their creative processes with one another, and in doing so, they become attentive to realities of audience and how others perceive and make meaning from their creations (1).

Creative writing is another art that has found a niche inside the composition classroom. Scholars like Tim Mayers (1999), Ted Lardner (1999), and Randall Freisinger (1978) have explored the similarities and differences between composition and creative writing and actively critique the institutional boundaries erected between disciplines. In doing

so, they ponder how professionals and students in each field may learn from one another. Additionally, in rhetoric and composition, there has been a flurry of interest in the ways creative nonfiction, specifically, can be utilized in the first-year writing classroom; the January 2003 issue of *College English* devoted an entire issue to the topic with essays by Lynn Bloom, Wendy Bishop, and others. Also, the popularity of creative nonfiction anthologies like Root and Steinberg's *The Fourth Genre* among teachers of first-year writing suggests that the creative arts may gradually find a home in Composition 101.

Like McElvain, my particular interest lies in the ways music-making and writing can be brought together in the writing classroom. For the last few years, I have been implementing a pedagogy that infuses musical composition—specifically the recording of electronic music—into my first-year composition courses. My students and I have been quite surprised by the theoretical and practical connections that exist between the production of popular electronic music (which is a cultural cornerstone for so many adolescents) and the production of academic writing. Certainly, my students learn a great deal from this interdisciplinary endeavor; even though they have no prior musical training and are only beginning their journey toward becoming academic writers, many of them seem naturally inclined to occupy the ideological chasm that yawns between the DJ's booth and the study group. By simultaneously drafting music and drafting essays, they seem to internalize very easily some fundamental abstractions that characterize the composing process: the messy, nonlinear nature of writing; the importance of citing and the tricky business of building upon prior knowledge; the social purposes of creating and sharing original work; the enigmatic notion of original voice, and the reciprocity required for successful coauthorship. Focusing on these lessons, I'll discuss the details and implications of my pedagogy.

## **The Writing Classroom as Music Studio**

Though my formal education is in rhetoric and composition, for the last 20 years, my personal passion has been writing and recording both experimental and popular electronic music. I spent most of my undergraduate career playing guitar or singing in seedy bars with bands or making muddy recordings of original material that I foisted on friends. Only recently has my craft—and my equipment—become honed enough for the public market; in 2001, EMI/Neurodisc/Priority published and distributed my first jazz-inflected, drum-and-bass CD under the artist name The Joy Project. Additionally, this year, I signed several more tracks to various independent labels, including a second full length Joy Project CD on Bar None Records [3].

My need to make music and share it with the public through commercial venues is an unquenchable, emotional thirst. Similarly, my doctoral training in writing pedagogy provides me with a kind of intellectual stimulation and satisfaction unavailable elsewhere. Given these two drives, it is natural for me to try to bring them together to benefit my students in the writing classroom. So each semester, I disassemble and re-assemble my digital recording studio in a secure space near my regular writing classroom. Though I don't want to overwhelm the uninitiated, the most important equipment in the studio includes a 16-track hard-disk recorder (a kind of tape recorder that allows individual tracks of sound to be recorded separately and then layered together), a microphone, a digital drum machine (a small electronic box that produces a multitude of drum sounds in perfect time, much like a professional drummer), a keyboard synthesizer, and a sampler (a device that can "capture" and "alter" small snippets of pre-recorded or acoustic sound in limitless ways). At the heart of the studio is a computer that makes all of this hardware operate synchronously.

The students populating the studio are first-year writers in a first-semester composition course. As I mentioned, none of them have any formal musical training (other than some vaguely remembered piano lessons), and none of them have worked with equipment of this kind. Because of their unfamiliarity, my role in the studio is largely as producer—they either explain to me what sorts of sounds they are seeking and I help in the process of discovery, or I connect the equipment in various configurations so they can experiment independently. Some students request to work individually, but most of the students compose in groups of two or three, having to negotiate differences in tastes and settle disagreements about song structure and content, as well as what source material to use. In addition to our regular class time where we discuss rhetorical issues and practice writing and revising our essays, students meet in the studio once or twice weekly, and they compose two to three separate musical pieces within a 14-week semester. There are no length or stylistic requirements placed on the compositions.

Of course, students complete significant amounts of research and writing in the course as well, and they follow a general developmental model shaped by James Moffett in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Although I know it is an older book—and although some of my teacher-friends have problematized the linearity of his theories—Moffett's ideas about having student writers engage in increasing levels of abstraction have made a profound, lasting impression on me. Hence, I've always structured my writing assignments so that topic choices and audiences gradually become more and more abstract for students as the semester progresses. Accordingly, I require students to write and revise four or five essays beginning with a personal literacy narrative and addressing a known, smaller audience; eventually they engage in persuasive writing about more abstract, controversial subjects to a global, faceless audience. They collect all their writing and submit a final portfolio of revised essays at the end of the semester. But there is an added dimension: I request that the writing act in some way be tied to the act of making music, and vice versa. In response, some students make topical connections among their written and musical compositions (for instance, they might write an argumentative essay *and* record an abstract musical piece about xenotransplantation), while others eschew topical connections and simply explore similarities between the actual physical, mental, and emotional processes of composing with words and composing with notes. Either way, the idea is to have students explore the reciprocal relationship between the two arts and understand the conversation, or connection, that can exist among the two creative processes.

To help students understand how this connection might be realized, I usually share some of my own written and musical work with them early in the semester. Most recently, I've had students read a creative nonfiction essay published in *Newtopia Magazine* titled "Centralia: A Small Town Located at the Entrance to Hell [4]." Additionally, as a class we listen to a related musical composition called "Seven Hundred and Seventy Two [2]" (MP3 format) that I recorded shortly after writing and revising the essay. In class, we analyze the similarities and differences of both compositions and discuss the ways they explore the strange environmental and political history of the small coalmining town of Centralia, Pennsylvania. (Since 1962, a devastating, unstoppable coal mine fire has been burning underneath the town, and its population has steadily decreased from 1,100 residents to under 20.) Though the compositions are in different mediums, students are usually adept at identifying the connection between them. While the written composition provides more factual and narrative detail about Centralia—and while the minimal, atonal electronic composition represents a more guttural, emotional response—both explore the same themes of dehumanization, depopulation, and the complex relationship humans have with the environment.

Once students experience a concrete example of the music/writing connection (and once they become familiar with the equipment in the recording studio), they are often eager to

try to make similar connections through their own work. Though I will not list all the assignments in detail here, the last section of this article will discuss one of the assignments that led to the discovery of some surprising theoretical and practical connections that even I did not expect to find.

## **General Lessons about Creative Processes**

When my students first enter the recording studio, some of them are apprehensive and afraid to touch the equipment. To me, this apprehension mirrors the hesitancy students sometimes exhibit when sharing writing for the first time in the composition classroom. However, after a brief orientation session and an assurance that they are unlikely to break anything, most of them eagerly begin to “play.” Pounding away at the keyboard or the drum machine, speaking into the microphone, and fiddling with various sound processors—echo-delays, reverberation, pitchshifting. At first, this is pure fun, and many of them play with abandon. During these early stages, I act only as facilitator by turning on and off machines, opting to remain in the background by not providing any musical direction. Though it is challenging for me at times, I sit quietly through the din. Thankfully, after the first session, most students realize that their disorganized sound-making needs direction and shape of some kind—especially if they are to compose a piece they would feel comfortable sharing with other students in a public forum. This happens at the end of the semester when each student creates a compact disc and distributes it to the rest of the class. This final, or publication, stage of our composing process clearly mirrors the final stages of the writing process, and issues of purpose and audience are often topics of discussion in both the music studio and in the writing classroom.

However, it is during the more formative stages of the musical composing process that students and I discuss the importance of both “playing” and planning in all creative processes, including writing. Without much prompting, students are able to quickly draw parallels to various prewriting activities, like brainstorming, and planning activities, such as outlining or background reading. We also discuss how individuals approached prewriting activities differently, and that these techniques did not necessarily work for everyone. In the music studio, the results of their planning sessions vary—some groups decide to record more traditionally structured songs with lyrics and 4/4 time signatures, while others plan to create more amorphous, arrhythmic, conceptual pieces.

The messy, nonlinear nature of the writing process is another general lesson students learn as they are involved in these parallel activities. Once they enter the musical drafting stage, students discover precisely how recursive any creative process can be (Nancy Sommers). Additionally, they realize that drafting itself—in any medium—is a multi-stage process that does not take place in one sitting. In other words, no one walks out of the music studio after a single session with a completed song in hand, and most students realize that drafting a quality piece of writing is unlikely to happen in a single setting as well. For many students, this is a harsh reality check; though most have been exposed to the writing process in some form, many admit to me that they continue writing drafts in one sitting, usually the day (or night) before a peer review session. When they realize that cramming is simply impossible in the recording studio, some students take this opportunity to reflect on their own writing process and how it might be improved by spreading it out over time. Again, these lessons come straight out of the goals they set for themselves in the studio: Track by track, as students slowly build their compositions, they find themselves having to retrace their steps, erasing this track or that track, re-recording it so it is “just right.” In fact, there was one group of students who recorded the same 30 seconds of sound almost ten times in an attempt to perfect it. I was struck by this desire for perfection, and I asked if they practiced their writing for school with the same attention to detail. I discovered a variety of answers. Some said that they did spend a great deal of

time rereading what they had written in an attempt to shape it and smooth it out as best as possible. Others said they were being more careful with their music-making than with their writing because the medium of popular music (which is inextricably tied to their everyday lives and provides a fundamental lens through which they view their world) and the audience (peers who might judge them negatively if their piece isn't acceptable in some way during public performance) "forced" them to pay more attention. Simply put, with some students, the stakes are higher when composing music than when writing academic essays.

There are many more lessons. As mentioned, for logistical reasons, students compose in groups, and this offers them the opportunity to learn about the sometimes tricky business of coauthoring. In particular, students learn how to synthesize different voices—largely due to varying musical preferences—into a coherent whole. For example, some students speak about rap music in almost religious terms. Others like speed metal or thrash or grunge, a few like country, some are devoted to trance and trip hop, and a number of students admit that they will listen to "whatever," including classical music. Overall, the groups' preferences are just about as diverse as radio station formats on the FM dial, and these preferences have a significant effect on the shape of their musical compositions. Consequently, radical differences in tastes require the groups to give and take, which many of them do quite eloquently. The recording process does not always progress smoothly, but if an impasse is reached that requires a new route, the majority of students collectively experiment and innovate until an agreeable solution presents itself.

At the same time they are learning to negotiate their musical preferences, they are also contending with synthesizing their individual voices in a collaborative written project. For this end-of-the-semester activity, students thematically plan and construct an "edited collection" (Calderonello, Beene, Simmons 475-95). Students choose the focus of the collection and gather previously published essays, poems, stories, and pictures, among other elements, to create a book. In most cases, individual students are in charge of shaping a particular chapter for which they write an introduction. Then, after combining their materials, members of the group collaboratively compose a preface to the entire book. In most cases, it seems as though the collaborative music they compose in the music studio mirrors their writing processes and helps them to negotiate the sometimes rocky terrain of coauthorship.

## **Sampling as Citing: The Death of the Composer**

In his oft-cited article "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes complicates the idea of original authorship and authentic voice. Barthes argues that texts are complex webs of cultural meanings; all texts are fundamentally intertextual, and authors function as "scriptors" who gather and synthesize previous texts and their meanings: "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture [. . .] the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (6). While many scholars have challenged Barthes, this post-structuralist notion—the rejection of an original author and the acknowledgment that we are mosaics of texts that exist prior to us—has become a concrete reality in the world of electronic music-making. This reality is due almost single-handedly to the development, manufacture, and mass consumption of sampling technology.

As mentioned, sampling is a technique where bits and pieces of pre-recorded material is "captured" by a device and used in some way to create a new piece of music. Almost every popular song our students listen to has been influenced by sampling technology in one way or another. In some cases, large pieces of pre-existing music are utilized to new

effect. Though a bit dated, Vanilla Ice's chart topper "Ice Ice Baby" from his 1990 album *To The Extreme* is an infamous example. This song utilized a section of the Queen/David Bowie collaborative hit "Under Pressure," which was released eight years earlier. In this case, pieces of the original recording—in particular, a bass line, a piano chord, and finger-snap—were captured and looped, new vocals were layered on top of the looped music, and voila! Another hip-hop artist becomes financially independent and buys a ranch in Beverly Hills.

Putting aside any arguments about whether this is a creative act or mere mimicry, sampling, in some form, is pervasive in all commercial music today. Its power in shaping the recording process cannot be denied, and its effects will be long lasting. Additionally, it is important to understand that any sound of any size can be sampled—as long as it exists on vinyl or compact disc or tape and can be fed into a sampling machine. And, because digital samplers are so versatile, once a sound is captured, it can be altered in a variety of ways to fit the song that is under construction: it can be slowed down, sped up, continuously looped, reversed, lengthened or shortened without changing the pitch, or played on a keyboard. Regardless of how samples are used, sampling technology itself seriously complicates the idea of an "original author" as it pertains to music-making in general.

As you might imagine, this technology has revolutionized the home recording industry. If I'm hammering out a song in my little studio, and I need a dozen violins plucking a C note (and the local symphony is on break), all I have to do is browse my collection of classical records, sample the right parts, and my earthly needs have been met. Of course, this very practice has also caused no end of controversy and litigation. Indeed, plagiarism is just as much an issue in the music publishing industry as it is in the print publishing industry, and this provides a perfect bridge to discuss the importance of citation and documentation with first-year writers. Once again "Ice Ice Baby" provides a good starting place: Vanilla Ice, or his producers or managers, never sought permission to utilize the aforementioned sample and legal actions were taken. Although the case never went to trial, the copyright holders of "Under Pressure" settled out of court for an undisclosed sum. Not surprisingly, my students are able to offer up the names of rap artists who have been embroiled in similar court cases over the years: Dr. Dre, De La Soul, Biz Markie, Busta Rhymes. In fact, I have learned from my students that an entire cottage industry has sprung up for the sole purposes of identifying and prosecuting the illegal use of samples. Legend has it that James Brown—one of the most oft sampled artists of all time—has an entire bank of lawyers continually scanning the popular music horizon to locate unlicensed snippets from "Funky Drummer," "Sex Machine," or any other of his original recordings.

Of course, there are many instances where proper clearance for samples is secured, and artists are able to legally and conscientiously build upon the work of others. Lkening this to proper citation and documentation, the students and I discuss how samples might be used in a new work, and we gather information about the legal (and monetary) requirements for doing so. Additionally, I share some of my own compositions that utilize samples to illustrate how this can be accomplished effectively. Students then begin learning the nuts and bolts of the sampling machine, and eventually they begin to excitedly show up to the music studio with their entire CD collections in hand, choosing parts of favorite songs that they want to sample and layer into their original compositions. As they peruse their own music libraries, I stress that they are indeed conducting in-depth research, and I take this opportunity to talk about how engaging "research" can actually be. Some students utilize large, one- or two-minute pieces as core loops of their new songs, while other students utilize only small sounds lasting less than a second. In some instances, the samples are left unadorned or unaltered, while in other instances, students warp the samples beyond recognition.

It is during this orientation to sampling technology that students venture into their first college-level research essay that requires them to conduct library research and utilize sources in a formal, argumentative, scholarly essay. Again, with little prompting, many students are able to draw parallels between sampling and citation. On the practical side, they seem to better understand the artistic challenges of incorporating quotes into a text; this process often mirrors the difficulties of placing samples into their musical compositions. For example, if a sample is out of key with an existing composition, or if it is at a different tempo, then either the sample or the surrounding tracks need to be altered in some way so that a synthesis can take place. In their writing, students are forced to make similar changes to their own sentences to effectively incorporate direct quotes or paraphrases. On the other hand, in some cases a sample will push the musical composition in another direction entirely, and the creative process will begin anew; this too can happen in writing, as we all know. Though this is often frustrating for students, it provides an opportunity to discuss the complicated nature of research and writing and how rarely the process moves in a linear fashion.

Besides these practical issues, students begin to make some startling theoretical connections as well. For instance, before our recording sessions begin, a handful of students admit the primary reason they use sources is because teachers ask them to; it is a required nuisance, another hurdle to jump. However, as they begin incorporating samples into their musical compositions, some students begin to see how their work becomes richer, varied, and multivocal. The sounds and musical passages they sample—many of which they could not recreate on their own—add a new dimension to their compositions. In final reflective essays (a core component of the writing portfolios they submit at the end of the semester), students sometimes write about the challenges of building upon previous work and how the process ultimately has a positive effect on their musical and written compositions. Several have said that as they conducted this synthesis, they became more serious about their original work because it had to rise to the same standard as the sources they were using. For example, in a final reflective essay, one student compared her musical and written compositions at the beginning of the course (a literacy narrative that required no outside sources and a musical composition created without any sampled material) with those at the end of the course (a documented, argumentative essay about the shortcomings of bilingual education and a musical composition that included, among other elements, sampled, intermixed snippets of English and Spanish dialogue from educational tapes). In her final reflection, she noted how her earlier compositions seemed more tentative and exploratory, while her final composition, which included multiple sampled voices effectively layered into a cacophony, seemed to make a stronger, more direct point about the confusion that can occur due to bilingual instruction. As a product of a flawed bilingual program, she herself had spent most of her life feeling ill-prepared for school, and she believed that both her written and musical compositions complemented one another and synthesized her viewpoint on this matter. She realized the ways that different mediums can powerfully explore and express different aspects of the same issue—and the effect *practice* has on building a body of creative work.

Some students also broach the topic of fair representation. While most utilize samples in a straightforward way that would allow listeners to recognize them immediately in the context of the new composition, some students opt to severely alter the samples, twisting or warping the soundwaves before placing them into their compositions. For example, students may turn the sample backwards, chop it up into granular pieces, speed it up, slow it down, or subject it to a variety of effects, such as echoes, reverberation, chorus, flanging, or pitchshifting. Due to this heavy processing, the samples are often not recognizable. To my surprise, when students make these artistic choices, a dialogue often opens up about the hazards of building upon the work of others, especially in writing. When using sources, even with good conscience, writers might misinterpret or

misrepresent other authors. We all agree that this is something to be guarded against, and that close, critical reading of texts is the best way to ensure fairness. However, if a writer is unscrupulous, there is always the possibility that he or she might purposely misrepresent what another author is saying for his or her own end. While students and I usually agree this is unethical, when it comes to the issue of severely altering samples for use in a new musical context, it is unclear if the two instances are analogous. However, for me, what is most important is that their exposure to sampling technology provides us with a concrete forum to discuss these rather weighty, somewhat abstract issues.

—W. Keith Duffy

## Note

I have thoroughly enjoyed spending time in the music studio with my writing students. Though time-intensive, this interdisciplinary approach to teaching writing has taught me a lot about the pervasive force of music in the lives of my students. I have also been exposed to new music (and new ways of thinking about music), and this has clearly helped me grow as both a writer and musician. I've been pleasantly surprised at how quickly many students extrapolate lessons learned from one creative process and apply those lessons to other creative endeavors—and how willing students are to share their work with each other. At the end of the each semester, I gather all the musical compositions the students have recorded and create a compilation CD and accompany this with a publication of selected essays. Everyone gets a copy. During our final class period, students choose one of their selections and play it for the rest of the class over a loudspeaker. As a part of this public "performance," students informally talk about their experiences as composers of music and essays, and they discuss the connections they've attempted to make. This entire process has shown me that the acts of recording music and writing essays are not as divergent as they might seem. Clearly, there is potential for future research examining relationships between the writing process and other creative arts, such as painting, sculpting, film, cooking, photography, textiles, and dance, among many others. In the future, I hope to continue studying this pedagogical approach by examining and experiencing students' word-based and music-based texts.

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